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ABSTRACT

The impact of informal learning on young children in the course of their play activities is discussed. A major objective is to emphasize that informal learning can help lay the base for multiculturalism in elementary education. It enables children from different cultural backgrounds to relate to and understand each other through play activities which are comfortable to them. The author presents a brief overview of recent studies in informal and formal systems of learning, a listing of differences between informal learning and formal instruction, illustrations of how informal learning occurs, and a discussion of the four kinds of informal learning that occur during play. He concludes that children's formal and informal education can be improved if parents and educators understand more about the effects of different kinds of play and the conditions under which such effects occur. (Author/DB)

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INFORMAL LEARNING

by

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The term "informal learning" is used to distinguish a way of learning that differs from that which results from formal instruction. The difference is neither in its content nor in the intellectual processing of knowledge that occurs, but rather in how learning is acquired and from whence the motivation to learn occurs. Nevertheless, such informal learning often has great impact on the learner because of several factors that are in operation.

Scribner and Cole (1973) have studied informal versus formal learning as systems used in different societies, primitive to complex, to transmit important facets of the culture to the youth. They have suggested that important differences in structuring reality result from such different systems of learning (1973, p. 557). Moreover, these differences tend to result in different ways of thinking, e.g., generalizing (formal) versus particularistic (informal). The concept of informal learning we are describing, while related to these "systems of informal learning," differs in that we are considering very brief periods of learning activity

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for individuals rather than large scope systems of transmitting cultural knowledge. Our focus of concern is not on the system but rather on learning events that occur.

Grandstaff (1974) at Michigan State reported studies of non-formal education in which they initially defined the concept in the negative sense as "all education that does not take place in the schools." Our concept is somewhat closer to theirs than to that of Scribner and Cole, although our emphasis is on learning while Grandstaff is primarily concerned with schooling.

In any event, informal learning is a concept that seems to offer possibilities that can add new dimensions and power to formal instruction if more can be learned about its effects and the conditions under which the effects occur best.

Some differences between "informal learning" and "formal instruction" are outlined below:

		Informal Learning	Formal Instruction
1.	Who initiates the learning?	Learner	Teacher
2.	Who organizes the learning content?	Learner	Teacher/ Curriculum
3.	Who schedules learning?	Learner	Teacher/School
4.	Who controls time spent, when to stop, restart, etc., learning?	Learner	Teacher/School-instruction system

To illustrate how such learning occurs, consider the following. A person might decide to learn about skiing, physics, or knitting and select a book to read about it. While the book is organized according to some teacher's notion of how best to present the content, it is not necessary for the learner to follow that sequence or even to read all of it. Rather, the "informal learner" can adapt the material to his/her own schedule, background, and interest span. The middle chapter can be read first, then the final summary, if such seems best to the learner. Of course, formal instruction will often help a person learn even more, but this often occurs best after informal learning has sparked an interest in formal instruction. It is somewhat more difficult to reverse the procedure, although it can be done by effective teachers. Thus, informal learning is practiced to some extent by everyone, but probably its most important impact is on young children, where it occurs as a part of play activities. It is this childhood period on which our attention is focused.

All animals apparently are motivated to pursue pleasurable activities and to avoid painful ones. This motivation leads the young to be playful and for humans to seek to create playthings and play events. As young children grow and develop, they begin to encounter play events that require time and effort to master if they are to realize the full pleasure that may be available to them. It is this confrontation that leads us to posit four kinds of informal learning that occur in play:

a) learning to play,

b) learning how to learn different forms of play,

c) learning processes (cooperation, persistence) through play, and

d) learning content (math concepts, etc.) through play.

The first kind of informal learning is consciously sought after by the learner while the others result from efforts to learn play and may have a transfer effect to other learning activities. For example, a child on encountering a new kind of play goes through observable stages of concentrated activity (Randall, 1975) in order to learn and master the new kind of play. During the course of such activity, he/she comes to learn such things as goal setting, tryout activities, checking and verifying, retrial, etc. In addition, such processes as cooperation, persistence, and observation, such as number and science concepts, may be developed.

Young children are used to learning informally -- mostly through play activities. Of course, some play is repeated as a pleasurable activity and, as such, is important to children's development. But much play activity has educational benefit. This is the distinctive type of play that we are focusing on in informal learning.

An important reason for emphasizing such informal learning in elementary schools is that it enables children from different cultural backgrounds to respond in ways that are comfortable to them. It helps lay the base for multiculturalism because children who may understand

little about cultural differences quickly recognize differences in play activities from one group to another. Thus, a laboratory for exploring these differences and building sensitivity and acceptance of them is available to teachers who utilize informal learning. Moreoever, while teaching about cultural differences is difficult and even threatening to many teachers, examining differences in play activities is not threatening and may be an easier route to exploration of cultural and ethnic differences for them. Research on such usage is underway at SEDL (Randall, Bauman, Newman, 1975).

It is interesting to note that Ager (1975) has reported, in studies of play in a small Eskimo village, the reflection of adult society in children's play. Although she failed to find play reflecting recent changes in adult role structures, she did report the operation of adult societal values in children's game preferences, game organization, and game attitudes. This would seem to confirm the suggestion that cultural differences are reflected in children's play and, therefore, play is a fruitful area to look for some aspects of multicultural program focus.

There are those who take the position that child's play is the private realm of children and should not be interfered with. Sutton-Smith (1971) has presented an enlightening discussion of what he terms the polarity that exists among and within adults about interfering in children's play. There is the romantic reverence for spontaneity versus the

redemptive notion of consciously deciding how to influence rather than unconscious interference. One suspects that he comes down slightly on the side of the redemptist position as do most psychologists. If any question lingers about Sutton-Smith's position, Smilansky leaves no doubt about her posture. "When we intervene, help and teach a child to play sociodramatic play, he gets better in this type of play as his experience in it accumulates," (Smilansky, 1971, p. 43). While suggesting the importance of play in developing creativity, intellectual growth, and social skills, she outlines conditions for indirect and direct influence on play that adults can and should take measures to achieve. Even the current director of the National Institute of Education, Harold Hodgkinson, has been quoted as saying (CEMREL Newsletter, 1975, p. 3):

> Yet if we look at the whole range of animal behavior we find that play is the primary learning mode. It is a major function without which no species could survive. Most highly creative people have a highly developed sense of play.

Toy manufacturers have found a market for educational toys among parents of children, which suggests that if we could tell parents (and manufacturers) more about the effects of different kinds of play and the conditions under which such effects occur, there might be a formidable interest.

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